Manitoba
Culture, Heritage
and Recreation

Seven Oaks House

86-03481/

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CANADIAN CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Main entry under title:

Seven Oaks House. –

Cover title.
Bibliography: p.
ISBN 0-7711-0109-0

1. Seven Oaks House (Winnipeg, Man.).
2. Winnipeg (Man.) – Buildings, structures, etc.
3. Inkster, John, 1799-1874 – Homes and haunts.
I. Manitoba. Historic Resources Branch.

FC3396.8.S48S48 1986 971.27'4 C86-099301-9
F1063.S48 1986

SEVEN OAKS HOUSE

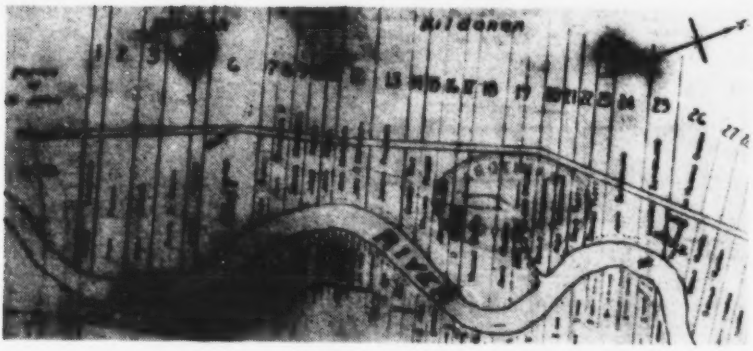
Seven Oaks House is often referred to as the oldest habitable home in Winnipeg. It was constructed between 1851 and 1853 by John Inkster and was continuously lived in until 1954. Furnished with Inkster family belongings and other period pieces, Seven Oaks House is now a museum which provides visitors with a fascinating glimpse of life at the Red River Settlement in the nineteenth century.

The Early Home

The owner, architect and builder of Seven Oaks House, John Inkster, was born in the Orkney Islands in 1799. He arrived in the North-West in 1821 as a servant of the Hudson's Bay Company, but established himself as a farmer at the Red River Settlement. He married Mary Sinclair in 1826, and the couple eventually acquired the land on which Seven Oaks House now stands.

The house which the Inksters built on this lot apparently derived its name from a nearby creek where seven large oak trees once stood. Called Seven Oaks Creek as early as 1817, this small waterway is thought to have been in close proximity to the site of the June 1816 Battle of Seven Oaks.

The first home John Inkster erected near this historic landmark was a two room log dwelling. It was built in the "Red River frame" style, a form of construction commonly utilized by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and its employees. Popular throughout northwestern Canada during the nineteenth century, this type of log building featured upright cornerposts



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

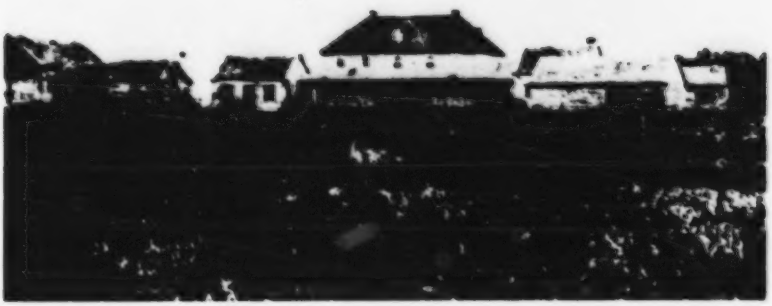
A sketch of river lots in the Parish of Kildonan done by the Dominion Land Survey; lot 6 corresponds to lot 215 of the Hudson's Bay Company survey

and interfitting horizontal logs held together with mortise pegs. With their symmetrical facades and steeply-pitched roofs, these structures resembled the stone buildings of Scotland and the Orkney Islands, the original home of many HBC employees.

Logs and not stone became the main building material in the North-West during the early and mid-nineteenth century, because stone was not readily available and logs were easier to work with and abundant. In Red River, where John Inkster lived, the cottonwood and oak trees found near the rivers were the most popular local building materials.

Once established as a farmer, John Inkster expanded his business interests, becoming a free trader and merchant. With business prospering and the family growing, John began construction on the larger dwelling known as Seven Oaks House in 1851. The Inkster store and the post office were later located in a portion of the first log home; the store offered goods imported from Great Britain and St. Paul, Minnesota, as well as local food stuffs. The two rooms of the original house are still standing: one was attached to Seven Oaks and serves as the kitchen, while the other is situated to the south of the main entrance.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives



Seven Oaks House, c. 1858

Seven Oaks House

Even though Seven Oaks House was built primarily of wood, John Inkster laid a stone foundation and built a stone-lined cellar for the dwelling. The foundation, in particular, displayed remarkable workmanship. It was not held together with mortar but simply by the cut of the stone. According to his son Colin, John Inkster received training as a stone mason before he joined the HBC, but the work on the house is believed to be the only masonry work he did in Canada.

In 1852 construction on Seven Oaks was halted by a devastating spring flood. Water covered the Inkster property to a depth of four feet (1.2 metres). John and Mary lived in a tarpaulin tent erected on the rough floor that had been hastily laid on the second storey of the house. The rest of the family and livestock were evacuated to high ground at Lilyfield, about halfway between present-day Winnipeg and Stonewall. Seven Oaks stood fast during the flood and construction resumed when the waters receded.

The oak logs which John Inkster used to construct Seven Oaks House were floated down the Assiniboine River from Baie St. Paul. Unlike the first home, and most contemporary log buildings in the settlement, Seven Oaks was not built in the Red River frame style. Inkster did not utilize upright corner posts to support the horizontal logs that formed the exterior walls. Instead, the oak logs were whipsawn, hewn seven inches square and then set one on the other, flush at the corners. The butt joints at the corners of the structure were secured with 1¼ inch (3.2 cm) wooden pegs known as "tree nails." The house was made entirely of wood; even the shingles were cedar, split and then sized with a drawing knife.

Materials not readily available in Red River such as glass, paint putty, door locks and hinges were sent from England via Hudson Bay. Seven Oaks, like other Red River buildings, featured multi-paned windows. Small panes were easier to ship from England than large ones because they could be carefully packed in kegs of flour or molasses to avoid breakage. Side lights surrounded the main door and these, like the windows, were a common feature of Red River dwellings.

The house had two storeys and nine rooms. The first floor included an entrance hall, front and back parlour, dining and breakfast rooms and a kitchen. The second level was comprised of four bedrooms and a small area probably used as a "bathroom." The house was almost fourteen metres long and over eight metres wide, providing sufficient space for the Inksters and their large family.

The downstairs walls were covered with plaster nearly five centimetres thick. Between the logs and layers of plastering a lining of buffalo hair and fur provided a primitive but effective form of insulation. The upstairs rooms were divided by paneling and finished with hand cut mouldings. The basswood ceilings sloped slightly, and were mitred at the corners.

Like most Red River houses, Seven Oaks is balanced and symmetrical. The front of the structure is covered with milled siding and the

entranceway is flanked on each side by two windows. On the second storey, five windows correspond to the openings below. The wide porch, which encircles the house, is a more unusual addition. Most Red River houses had their entranceway at ground level and very few featured verandas.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Seven Oaks House, covered in milled siding, c. 1897; the people in the photograph include Captain Colin Robertson Sinclair and Mary Inkster (third from the right)

From Family Dwelling to Museum

When construction was completed in 1853, an imposing structure stood on the second rise up from the Red River. Home to the Inkster family for approximately sixty years, Seven Oaks housed one of Red River's more prominent families.

John Inkster and his third son, Colin, were very active in settlement politics. From 1857-1870 John served on the Council of Assiniboia, the governing body of Red River prior to entry into Confederation. Although unable to attend, he was also elected as an English-speaking representative to a council convened by Louis Riel in November 1869. Colin Inkster declined election to the provisional government for the parish of St. John's in the election of February 1870, but served as a member of the upper chamber of the Manitoba legislature from 1870 to 1876. He also served as High Sheriff of the province and then as sheriff of the Eastern Judicial District for over fifty years.

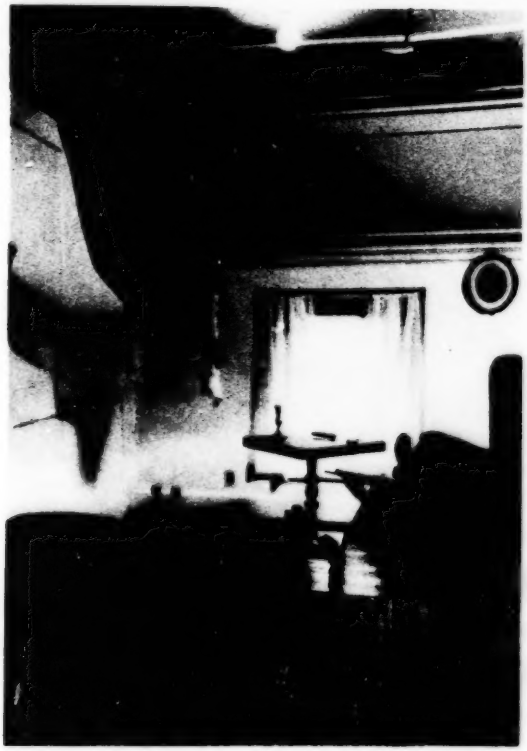
The Inkster family was also very active in the religious life of the settlement. A devout Anglican, John served as rector's warden to David Anderson, the first bishop of Rupert's Land and later to Archbishop Machray. Colin followed in his father's footsteps, and served as rector's warden at St. John's Cathedral from 1870 onwards. He was also a member of St. John's College Council from its origin until 1925.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

John Inkster

Seven Oaks housed the Inkster family until 1912. With the death of Miss Mary Inkster, the house and grounds were turned over to the City of Winnipeg for use as a park. The city of West Kildonan became the owners in 1952 and began a restoration program to turn the house into a museum in 1956.

The restored Inkster dwelling is a valuable part of our provincial heritage. At one time, log buildings like Seven Oaks were a common form of dwelling at the Red River settlement. After Manitoba entered Confederation in 1870, however, an influx of Canadian immigration caused a demographic shift in the West. The sleepy trading post of Fort Garry became a bustling city called Winnipeg. Many of the old Red River houses were located in what became the downtown area of the city, and most of them were torn down and replaced by modern business blocks. A few other log houses, located in rural or semi-rural locations, were spared. Seven Oaks is one of the scattered handful which remain to provide



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Captain Colin Robertson Sinclair's bedroom

Manitobans with a picture of life at Red River during an earlier century.

The Seven Oaks Museum recaptures something of the style and purpose of the original rooms in the house. One of the bedrooms is commonly known as the "Captain's Room," in honour of its one-time occupant, Captain Colin Robertson Sinclair. Brother of Mrs. Mary Inkster, the Captain returned to Manitoba to live at Seven Oaks. As a sailor he was accustomed to sleeping in a hammock and found it necessary to continue this practice at his new home. Strung up between the ceiling beams, a similar hammock can now be seen hanging in the restored bedroom at the museum.

Another room on the second floor is filled with playthings and child-sized furniture. Although several of the Inkster children were grown-up when Seven Oaks was built, this room is used to display toys typical of the era. Miss Mary Inkster's old round topped steamer trunk stands in the master bedroom. Other family treasures include Mrs. Inkster's wooden sofa, her linen chest and the original mirror on the chest of drawers. The Inkster heirlooms and various other period pieces in the house add to the nineteenth century atmosphere of the museum.

Seven Oaks' position as one of the oldest homes in the province and its association with the prominent Inkster family, have ensured its place as a centre for the preservation of Manitoba history. The museum

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The front parlour provides a good illustration of the restoration of Seven Oaks House

provides all of its visitors with an important illustration of the province's social and architectural heritage.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Seven Oaks House, c. 1959; note the log structure which was part of the original log house

Suggestions for Further Reading

Information on Seven Oaks House is available in a pamphlet distributed by the Seven Oaks Museum. A more detailed account of early Manitoba architecture can be found in Jill Wade's *Red River Architecture 1812-1870,* (an unpublished MA Thesis; University of British Columbia, 1967).

Information on the Inkster family can be found in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. X,* 1871-1880. The Provincial Archives of Manitoba has in its possession the Inkster family papers.

Credits

The cover photograph is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Archives.

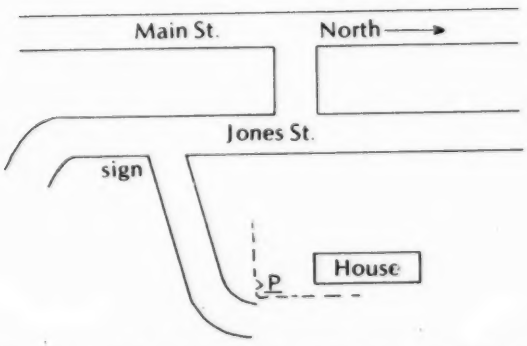
The Historic Resources Branch would like to thank the Provincial Archives of Manitoba for the use of its collections.

Special thanks to Mrs. C.L. McGowan who so kindly contributed her time to the completion of this pamphlet.

SEVEN OAKS HOUSE

This house, completed in 1853, is one of the oldest surviving residences in Manitoba. It was built by John Inkster, 1799-1874, farmer, merchant and free-trader, and was privately occupied until 1954. Its name derives from seven large oak trees which stood nearby, marking the site of the Battle of Seven Oaks fought on June 19, 1816 between the servants of the Hudson's Bay Company, the Selkirk Settlers and representatives of the rival North West Company.

The Historic Sites Advisory Board Of Manitoba



This plaque is located outside of the Seven Oaks House Museum.